

DUXBURY'S TOWN DUMP

(Sometimes known as "the Exchange" -- now more properly called "The Transfer Station")

By the REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

The vote was decisive. Charlie Fargo didn't need to ask for a "count." Despite an eloquent and reasonable appeal by John Leonard, the citizen outrage over the increase in the "dump sticker" to 10 expressed in Town Meeting killed it dead. Absolutely dead. Now there would be no charge for the use of the transfer station whatsoever, although a sticker for dump use would still be required.

Why did taxpayers react so violently to this increase and force the staff at Town Office to refund the \$10 fees to those who had already paid them (at a cost of \$3800)? There are any number of opinions. One was the high-handed way in which the \$10 fee was decided upon; another was the resentment created by such an enormous charge (1 for one would have gone for a \$5 amount), when the transfer station plan was sold to the town with the promise that it would be self-liquidating and not a burden on the tax levy. And I may be the only one in town to think so, but I believe it was the gut-level expression of outrage that the last vestige of the traditional personalized life of Duxbury had been wiped out in favor of professionalism. The town dump was a personal institution. It was the one common enterprise that townspeople engaged in without political interference. It was a folk-enterprise. People met and talked with one another on a basis of equality they never reached at any other place except perhaps town meeting itself. Promoters of good causes went here first to seek support. Paul Barber, it is reported, campaigned for selectman here (at the beginning of a 9-year term it turned out).

There was enthusiasm about a visit to the dump, and many felt obliged never to leave without taking something with them. Bob Stewart says he knew of a man who reassembled a wrecked automobile there, stuck in a battery and drove it off. My son, who worked at the cemetery one summer, reports picking up enough bicycle parts to make himself a bike for his college campus days. I myself picked up a yellow shirt I wore for 5 years till Mrs. Merry sneaked it away from me. A piano dropped off enabled a nearby mother of 3 to teach them music lessons.

The dump was sightable for miles by its clouds of smoke, and its flocks of seagulls. These seagulls were based usually on the roof of the Unitarian Church, which assumed a white cover whether they were in residence or not. As Jim Pye says, the acrid smoke that rose from the burning waste gave an earthy flavor to the situation. Small children cried for their parents to take them to the dump, it was such a "different" kind of experience. I never heard the legend that the seagulls carried one of these over the dump fence so he wouldn't get in their way, but dealing with the seagulls was only one aspect of dump activity -- giving a kind of "wildlife" touch to it. Do you wonder that people flew into a rage at the elimination of this very human institution?

The burning designates one period of the history of the dump. It was in 1904 that the town purchased the present dump site, then a gigantic hole in the earth, several feet deep and many acres in size. Clandestine dumping of trash in wooded areas and on remote marshes had become a public menace, so land was bought, a "disposal officer" appointed, and the selectmen acting in their capacity as "board of public health" felt that matters were at last under control. The burning of the trash placed the dump under the jurisdiction of the fire department (it now is under the highway dept.) and rigid exclusion of garbage (material that could be consumed by fowl and other animals, chiefly swine) set up a workable system. Junk dealers were frequent visitors at the dump to obtain the metal remaining after the burnings.

It is to be recalled that at this time (before and just after World War I) that the majority of households had a flock of chickens for eggs, a cow in the barn for bacon, as well as a dog and a cat or 2. There were plenty of hungry mouths ready for kitchen leftovers, and the number of grain stores in business testified to the fact that animal diets were enriched often by more substantial fare. It was indeed a system that worked as well as could be expected as it kept going until right after World War II. At this time when fewer and fewer families had cows or pigs, commercial "pig sties" arose located in remote parts of the town and garbage collections for a modest fee came into vogue. At this time as well, garbage restrictions that worked after a fashion at the dump were largely ignored and the seagulls began their daily vigil and other less attractive predators appeared as human nature reassessed itself and waste disposal again became a number one public problem.

Besieged by state regulations forbidding open air burning, and EPA regulations about soil leaching into the public water supply (Plymouth County had made a survey of Duxbury soil and determined that waste disposal in soil was strictly limited here), the town fathers looked around to see what could be done. Suggestions for an incinerator facility were received, and many others with much arguing back and forth in the Duxbury Clipper through the years of 1971-73. It was finally decided to erect a transfer station where

townspeople would drive into a fenced-in enclosure (to keep out predators of all kinds), toss their rubbish into a concrete compactor ditch, their paper waste into a recycling center, as well as glass in barrels of different colors, and their brush into a chipping area.

In this way a sanitary facility, emptied every day, free of flies, vermin and unpalatable for birds would serve Duxbury residents; at the same time equipment would be on hand to recycle materials such as paper and glass to replenish the town coffers.

It was a landmark decision for the town, and stands today as a monument to those who struggled so hard and so long to see it brought into being. Former selectman Ruth Rowley, as my research indicates, was chiefly responsible for it. It is to her files I owe most of the data you are reading in this essay.

I went to the transfer station and held a brief interview with Peter Grealy, the "transfer station operator," as he is entitled. He acted like a man who believes in the value of his work and talked freely about his problems. Apparently, the first hope was that solid waste deposited here would be compacted, taken to an incinerator for further reduction, then turned over to a power company for the generating of electricity. This did not work out, and the present practice is to compact it here, load it onto a truck and carry it daily to a landfill site out of town. Grealy said he had 2 problems: 1) lumber -- it is so hard to help people understand the limits of the compactor, and 2) the brush chipper, which can take anything up to 5" in diameter but finds it difficult to chip tiny shrubs.

I asked him about the recycling program. Was it working well? "Actually, only about 10% of the people use it. It's a lot easier just to back the station wagon up to the ditch and chuck it in. It is a bit of a chore to separate cardboard items from newspapers too, and different colored bottles, but if people would do it, there would be so much more savings for the town. And if you are going to write a story about us, perhaps you'd better add that if only 10% use the recycling equipment, only 3% read our regulations." (I'm hoping the closing section of the article will include some of these.)

"I guess when you're dealing with human nature, you do find problems," I replied. I was thinking I'm afraid of the long history of mankind's dealing with the problem of waste and rejection.

Societies from earliest times have always had the problem of waste. My visits from Peking out to the "Western Hills" on my trip to China in the early thirties took me past the city dump, with its smoking rubble, its buzzards and its individuals eking out a bare subsistence as they clawed through the refuse. Archaeologists tell us that the clearest indicators of the quality of life of a particular culture are given by the content of its waste disposal. A civilization is known by what it throws away, and car, and no use for. It is indeed a shocking thought that what is rejected is not always of a material nature. George MacDonald, the rebuilder of the worship center of Iona off the east coast of Scotland, puts it rather bluntly: "Mankind should remember that Jesus Christ was not crucified on a golden cross between two golden candle sticks but on the city dump between 2 thieves."

We are known for what we reject as well as what we retain. I can't help feeling that there is a religious dimension to "waste disposal." Are we saying by our actions that there are materials and substances created by God and fashioned by man that are of no conceivable use whatsoever? I have often watched people throw things into the dump as undoubtedly some have watched me and wondered why these particular items could not somehow with a little creative imagination be brought back into usefulness to further the comfort and safety of human beings.

I guess I am raising the issue of our "aborted" society - of the vast quantities of rejected things of our age. I believe we are living now in the twilight of our age of affluence; it may be time we realized that there are limits to what we always thought was unlimited abundance. The wastage of this care-free industrial production is coming back to haunt us in our ground seepage of hazardous chemical materials. We are not free to disregard the basic laws of nature and life. We have to rethink our relationship to our environment and our life style from a total point of view. The Transfer Station, if used as it was set up, is Duxbury's answer to the long-standing habit of polluting our soil, our streams and our oceans. God created for us a universe of nature which He lends us freely to use for our living, and we have a Day of Reckoning to face when we will be accountable. It is indeed hard to get away from the religious dimension of waste disposal. For that is where it belongs; it is as fundamental as that. This is how I view it, as I begin a story on the town dump and end it with our responsibility before God for the way we use His Creation.

It always struck me as ironic (until I gave it some thought) that Jesus in the miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, asked at the end of the meal "Gather up the fragments that remain that nothing be lost" from. One who had just fed all these people beginning with 5 loaves of bread and 2 small fish. As I have thought more about this incident I have seen in it a stern admonition that man is to use the material world for his living, but severe penalties await waste. Perhaps the old New England slogan, "Waste not - want not," has its origins here. To rephrase it, "If we are careful not to waste, we will never be in want."

Dump regulations are available to all who ask the transfer station operator for them. They are detailed and explicit, and make good sense. Highlights are the following: The dump is open from 8 am to 4 pm and closed Monday and Tuesday and major holidays.

The compacter will take all normal garbage and rubbish, including small twigs of brush. **DO NOT BRING LIVE COAL** as some did last week and necessitated a new paint job on the trailer.

Metal materials can be recycled if dropped off behind the fence on the right as you enter the area, as well as tree limbs from 1½" up to 5" beside the chipping machine on the left.

All kinds of paper separated from cardboard may be deposited in the recycling shed at the far left of the area. Newspapers, magazines, books in the left bin and corrugated and other cardboard in the right.

Clear, green and brown glass containers may be recycled by placing in designated metal barrels, with caps removed.

It is my own practice to consult with Peter Grealy if I have brought questionable materials for disposal. You will find him and his assistant understanding and helpful.

In these days of "living with less," a careful stewardship of our material resources is essential. One of the ways we can exercise this is by using our new Transfer Station for the usefulness that was built into it. Perhaps the practice of segregating our glass, newspapers and metal refuse as well as our garbage and general trash in our storage area on our home premises, in the corner of our garage or behind it or wherever it may be will facilitate our task. I would dearly love to see that 10% of recyclers multiplied and think of the cash savings that would accrue to the town!

So as we begin a new year, with its household cleaning, and our general stock-taking of our material possessions, a new look also at our town transfer station can help us not only dispose of our "waste," but recycle the goods we no longer find of use to us, and turn them into tangible cash assets for the town treasury.

Yes, I do miss the old dump, as I have said, but this is a new age, with new sensibilities and new responsibilities, and our present disposal facilities are arranged to enable us to discharge these with a minimum of discomfort and inconvenience.

Reading the fascinating article about the dump by the Rev. Canon Robert Merry reminds me of all the wonderful things I have found at the Duxbury dump. In the days when "dump picking" was permitted, it was great fun to first dump your rubbish and then go looking around for the goodies. We have several tables in our house, which were picked up there and revamped. A complete set of restaurant china equipped our young son's first apartment.

Today those days are gone, but it is encouraging to find -- over by the place you dump papers -- a stack of magazines and paperbacks. People carefully look them over and take one or 2. I have just finished reading an exciting tale, "Iceberg," which I found there and will return it on my next trip. And what a good place to take your read magazines.

-- Bobbie Cutler

Here is an excerpt from John's book, *Put It on the Front Page, Please!* written in 1960:

A town dump, as John said in one of his editorials, is a fine institution.

It's an informal meeting place where you run over glass and into people you haven't seen for weeks. It's a place where a person can give vent to so many suppressed feelings. Here Father, forced to curb his congenial urge to flick cigarette ashes on the living room rug, toss his topcoat over a chair or leave dull razor blades on a bathroom window sill, can really let off steam. There's something grimly satisfying about heaving cartons full of mildewed shoes, bent coat hangers, twisted toothpaste containers, broken toys, empty lotion bottles and other kinds onto that inspiring mountain of rubble. This shedding-off process gives you a peculiar sense of renewal.

You are *about to leave the wonderful dump when you notice a perfectly good dresser. Hmmm.... Some fool, too lazy to glue it together, send it down and refinish it, probably left it there in a moment of weakness and now wishes he had it back. You glance furtively about to see if anyone is looking. It might take some explaining if that snooty neighbor across the street saw you scavenging, but of course you could hardly call it scavenging when you are retrieving a perfectly good dresser which may be an antique. Boy, will your wife be pleased when she sees the dresser. Just what the kids need for the bedroom.

Yes, a town dump.

Yes, a town dump is a fine institution. I just came back from the place, and, as usual, I have a feeling of renewal. It was so much fun heaving those cartons of mildewed shoes, belt coat hangers, lotion bottles -- it sure does give a fellow a feeling of satisfaction. And it sure was a relief to get rid of that confounded, rickety, ugly dresser I tripped over every time I tried to move around the cellar. It's stuff like that that clutter up a house, but you just try telling your wife THATS chum.

Actually, the dresser John referred to in this editorial was the one *he* brought from the dump, the scavenger.

mp has received as much publicity
To page 11

TOWN DUMP

From page 10

as Duxbury's. Besides several editorials on dumps that have appeared in the Clipper, Everett Marston described our local dump for the readers of Time Magazine. "The town dump is just a nice place for people to meet, leave trash, vow eternal friendship and go their ways," he said. Time Magazine, commenting on his words, added:

In Duxbury's own dump, as in Lincoln's, Hingham's and Weyland's, local citizens who can well afford to pay for garbage removal prefer to haul away the week's trash in their own Chevrolets, Thunderbirds, Chryslers and Volkswagens. Thus, on every Sunday morning gather old friends and new acquaintances who dump their stuff, then stay around to exchange gossip, renew friendships and, in a most delicate way, pick up a few worthy items

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piano that served for music lessons for her 4 children; a Lincoln housewife found a perfectly usable playpen for her baby. To these dumps, too, come service committees from the League of Women Voters and even local politicians in search of a ready-made audience. On one recent Sunday, a crowd of happy-go-dumping Hingham residents showed up with jugs of martinis and plates of hors d'oeuvres, proceeded to make a 3-martini cocktail hour to cap off the dumping chores.

But even the town dump can make for complexities. "Like everything else in this Atomic Age," muses Professor Marston, "our dump is getting organized and is not as informal as it once was. The privilege of taking things has gone." It may not be long before some cheerful martini-toting group, decked out in Sunday-go-to-dumping clothes, will be confronted by the ultimate of barriers: a sign reading No Dumping.

John and I have never seen a cocktail party in full sway at the town dump, but it is certainly a social center that provides newsy tidbits for "Around Town." Although we don't usually transact business at the dump, John did run into G. Golby Hewitt one Sunday morning and sold him a monthly ad for the Clipper. Golby is a partner of Beit, Dalton & Church of Boston.